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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000894

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, OES  
BANGKOK FOR ESTH  
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA NGOS LAY OUT CONSERVATION PRIORITIES

REF: 2004 OESI FUNDING PROPOSAL FOR "CONSERVATION

GATEWAY"

11. (SBU) Summary: A team of locally based environmental NGOs, backed by local experts, has produced a comprehensive analysis of Burma's most pressing priorities for biodiversity conservation. The report is the first of its kind that we've seen and is realistic in its objectives and its assessment of the key barriers to success: weak civil society, limited resources, and poor government policies. We think the USG can help address some of the report's central challenges without violating restrictions on passing assistance to the GOB. End summary.

First, Identify the Problem

12. (U) A Rangoon-based contractor for UK NGO BirdLife International led a small team of Rangoon-based INGOs in drafting a comprehensive assessment of Burma's conservation priorities (pouched to EAP/BCLTV). The report, entitled "Investment Opportunities in Biodiversity Conservation by Civil Society in Myanmar," was drafted at the behest of a group of local environmental NGOs and academics following an August 2003 roundtable discussion of the critical situation for Burma's biodiversity. The Chief of Mission (COM) and econoff attended a July 9 briefing on the results of the assessment.

13. (U) The group, and subsequent draft report, identified in Burma 72 priority sites, ten priority corridors, and at least 145 globally threatened species in Burma. The major threats to these areas and species were: (1) overexploitation of certain animal species for food and the international wildlife trade (mostly to China), (2) habitat loss (from logging and infrastructure projects), (3) conversion to farm land (especially oil palms); and, to a lesser degree, (4) invasive species and (5) pollution. The report's authors were cautious not to put too much blame on the GOB for these situations, though they did clearly mention the negative impact of poor administration of environmental policies, anemic GOB spending on conservation, and environmentally unfriendly development and land-use policies.

Next, Be Realistic

14. (U) The NGOs and experts responsible for the report agreed that considering the poor state of civil society and a dearth of funding it was unrealistic to expect positive "conservation outcomes" for each of these priority areas. Thus, the report's authors established a more manageable list of areas where conservation partners could focus their energies.

15. (U) In the final analysis, the experts chose seven priority corridors. Within these corridors the authors identified 37 priority sites and four additional sites outside the corridors (because they contained globally endangered species or globally threatened species endemic to Burma). Finally, the experts narrowed the list of species to 38 -- including 11 globally endangered species and nine globally threatened species endemic to Burma.

Better Coordination and Education Needed

16. (U) The report also stressed the need for a better conservation infrastructure in Burma. These "thematic" or strategic priorities included making biodiversity and conservation a part of broader GOB policy decisions, building civil society's capacity to participate in conservation, and improving coordination among local and international NGOs to most efficiently use limited resources.

Who'll Foot the Bill?

17. (U) One of the most important obstacles to achievement of the report's "conservation outcomes" is lack of funding. The report blamed sanctions by "western governments" for discouraging investment in this area and also the GOB for not attaching enough budgetary importance to conservation. The

GOB as a signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity has committed to providing financial support for biodiversity protection, however little has materialized. Likewise local civil society and private sector actors have provided basically nothing for conservation. Though the funds are lacking for effective protection, the report rightly recognizes the GOB's improving attitude toward conservation with its recent decisions to set aside two large areas of land as protected areas.

18. (U) The report identifies the Japanese government and the UN as the largest bilateral and multilateral donors to Burma, though neither spend particularly much on conservation programs. The multilateral development banks (MDBs) are not active in Burma due to Burma's arrears to the World Bank and U.S. opposition to MDB programming in Burma. Likewise large private environmental funds, such as the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, do not offer grants for Burma because they often receive significant contributions from the World Bank and other private foundations that will not support anything in Burma.

19. (SBU) In this thrifty environment, the UN resident coordinator in Rangoon is taking the lead to try and respond to the report's challenge to find investment. In a sidebar conversation with the COM, representatives of the German and Japanese Embassies, and several INGOs, during the July 9 briefing, the UN official said he intends to approach the Global Environmental Facility (GEF) to see about getting GEF funding into Burma. He cited the recent success of getting money approved for Burma from the Global Fund for TB, Malaria, and HIV/AIDS as evidence that proper monitoring and accountability mechanisms are in place here to receive disbursements of GEF funds. The GEF focal point for Burma is the director of the National Commission for Environmental Affairs, a 1986 Humphrey Fellow and close Embassy contact.

Comment: There's Merit, But Not Money

110. (SBU) We welcome the report as the first in-depth analysis of the country's conservation priorities. The report is comprehensive and realistic in its scope and its prescriptions. Finding funding will be a challenge, though the GEF may be a good (though longer-term) partial solution. In the more immediate term, we think the USG can help this worthy cause in a small way without violating restrictions on assisting the GOB. Two of the report's strategic priorities (building civil society and improving NGO coordination) are precisely the objectives driving a proposed local "Conservation Gateway" NGO that would act as a clearinghouse for information, allow coordination among environmental NGOs already on the ground, and integration of new entrants (ref memo). Minimal USG funding, either from OES or EAP resources, would get this Gateway up and running in short order. End comment.  
Martinez